

Eight features of quality caregiving for infants and toddlers



ECE resources

Caregiving is an important part of pedagogical work for teachers of infants and toddlers. It is not just a set of tasks that must be completed for the child's wellbeing. Neuroscience has demonstrated that, especially in early life, development of the brain and the body are closely interrelated. This means that physical care is an integral part of, and stimulates, infants' and toddlers' learning and development. The nurturing involved in moments of care such as mealtimes, nappy-changing and going to sleep, offer a meaningful context for developing attuned interactions which are an essential component of [infant and toddler pedagogy](#). Small group sizes, a high ratio of adults to children (ideally 1:3) and low staff turnover all help to enable better quality caregiving practices. Research into quality caregiving for infants and toddlers has identified the following eight features.

Key teaching

Key teaching, also called primary caregiving, where a teacher takes primary responsibility for a child's care, is essential for supporting attuned caregiving in which the caregiver is aware of and responsive to the child. This helps infants and toddlers build attachment and a sense of security. The intimate caregiving relationships established through key teaching build vital trust and reassurance for infants. Key teachers can support children through transition into the centre, daily separations and reunions with parents and whānau, and other moments of transition such as going to sleep or mealtimes. Key teachers also introduce the child to a widening range of relationships.

Key teaching contributes to strong relationships as it facilitates a multitude of interactions that allow the teacher and the infant or toddler to get to know each other. Children's needs for nutrition, sleep, activity and comfort can then be met in individualised ways that further build their competence and strengthen the connections between caregivers and children. In a key teaching system, the child and family are often assigned a caregiver before they start at the early childhood setting, but it might sometimes be worth considering the personalities of children and teachers to see what the best match may be, or even allowing a bit of time for infants and toddlers to show a preference for a particular teacher. A good match is important for effective relationship-building. No child or parent should be forced into a relationship with a key teacher, so ECE providers need to create opportunities for parents to voice concerns or questions, and be open to making modifications that are mutually agreeable.

Some settings may prefer to use a whānau caregiving approach, which entails a more collective approach to caregiving in which a child is cared for by multiple caregivers. A key teacher in this approach may have responsibility for an infant or toddler's transition, and maintaining communication with the family, but this relationship would quickly facilitate relationships with other adults over time.

Continuity of caregiver

Continuity of care means that children remain with the same caregivers for more than a year, and ideally up until the child is three years old, giving children and teachers time to get to know each other. A lack of continuity can have negative impacts on children's learning and development as repeated detaching and re-attaching to new caregivers is emotionally stressful for infants and toddlers.

Many practices can support continuity of care. For example, you might consider building 'family groups' of children and two or three teachers which remain together in a small group for large parts of the day, and which also remain constant over a prolonged period of time. Planning multi-age groups with each teacher means that children need not transfer caregiver when they reach a birthday. Another alternative is allowing 'looping', where same age groupings move on to a new physical space with a familiar caregiver until they leave the setting, at which point the caregiver takes on a new group.

Of course, it is likely to be impossible to have the same caregiver present at every moment of a child's time at the setting due to shift times, leave and other absences. Strategies to overcome these difficulties include identifying other teachers to build a relationship with and knowledge of the child, and making sure that, if a teacher leaves, there is overlap between the familiar teacher and a new one. When new caregivers need to step in to cover, this should be explained to the child. It is important to ensure a consistency of practice across caregivers: while it does not replace the security of a key teacher, it helps children know what to expect from each adult in your setting. For example, if one caregiver always gives children a few minutes notice before coming back to change their nappies, another caregiver who was caring for children in his or her place would also give children the advance notice they are used to.

Effective settling processes

It is important to have parents involved in the transition to ECE and the settling process. Ensuring the child's emotional security in the new setting should be seen as a joint task between the parent and the caregiver. Try to have only one child settling in at a time, because the presence of the parents during this new child's visits can be unsettling for the other children. A settling process might look like this:

- A short first visit so that feeding or changing will not be necessary, with the parent present the whole time. The parent and child explore the setting and ensure the child has a positive experience.
- A second visit in which the key teacher starts to interact more closely with both the parent and child, so that the child becomes aware of their presence. On this and subsequent visits, the amount of time that the parent and child spend in the setting each day might increase. When the parent and teacher agree the child is ready, the parent can start leaving the child; over the following visits, the length of time that the child is left without the parent can be increased.
- The key teacher might ask the parent to carry out the first nappy change while they observe, in order to plan a nappy change routine for that child based on what they are used to with their parent. This practice might be repeated, observing the parent's routine for mealtimes and sleep times.

Adapting to the child

Teachers should take time to find out how a child prefers to be fed, how they like to fall asleep and how they react to loud noises or different kinds of touch. This means adapting practices to the child, rather than expecting the child to meet teachers' expectations or to adapt to the setting's fixed routines. A flexible programme supports individualised care, as it enables teachers to follow the child instead of a roster. The aim is for infants and toddlers to develop a sense of security that comes from knowing what to expect of their world, both at home and in the early childhood setting.

Attentive responsiveness

Caring involves genuine attentiveness. For example, this means watching attentively for cues that the infant is ready for the next mouthful during feeding. This gives the child a role in the feeding process and demonstrates that their every communication is meaningful and listened to. Every interaction provides an opportunity to interact in a caring way, which offers children guidance but also freedom to learn and

develop. The gentle and considerate handling of and interaction with an infant or toddler affects their developing self-concept as someone worthy of respect and consideration.

Partnership

Care is not effective when the independence of either the child or the caregiver is reduced. Both teacher and child need to be heard by each other and feel able to express wishes, preferences and dislikes. Caregiving is not about meeting children's needs at whatever cost. Not all needs must be met: sometimes there are other priorities or children's demands are unreasonable or unsafe. At times, not complying with children's requests might provide opportunities to build resilience, self-control and tolerance.

Maximising learning

There are multiple learning opportunities present within caregiving routines and the flow of everyday experience. When teachers and infants and toddlers are both focused on the same activity of care, it allows for the development of the shared meanings necessary for attuned caregiving. Within attuned interactions, teachers can regulate and influence infants' and toddlers' attention and build their interest, awareness and understanding. There are opportunities for co-operative action, where the infant or toddler contributes to particular tasks during a nappy change, or during feeding, where both parties must synchronise their movements. These are also rich contexts for language development and conversation.

Widening the range of relationships with others

The safety and security promoted by a predictable relationship with a permanent caregiver ensures that the child is supported to develop relationships with other caregivers and children in the setting. This enables the child to engage in, and learn from, a wider range of interactions.

References

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